

IMAGINING A MAN IN CONNEMARA CLOTH

By GARRETT EVANS

THE twilight hours are a witching time, particularly in late autumn. High up on Jeremiah's Run in the Virginia Blue Ridge Mountains the leaves along the stream are beginning to turn and there's a bite to the air. In south-west Britain the change is more subtle and the twilight seems to go on forever; there in the forests along the Upper Teign or further upstream on the greens, browns, and purples of the darkening moors.

There seems to be a greater calm in the evening, the activity of day is over and one prepares for sleep. An evening in autumn is doubly attractive because of all this. One might suppose such preferences are a bad sign, an indication of galloping senility or of a "death-wish". Thoughts of this sort might point to the fact that one is no longer doing one's best to fight off the Grim Reaper.

Whilst doing such things as "analysing" the imagery of a poem in a lecture theatre, it becomes obvious that undergraduates of almost any type prefer the spring, the rebirth, and that time of day washed with the golden light of dawn. They are perhaps perfectly right to do so. I usually choose the evening rise, and if it's autumn, so much the better.

Though it was late in the season, in an area of the Transvaal that's usually cool, it had been as hot as Washington D.C. in August, which is hot indeed. We wisely turned out not long before sunset. It was cool, we fished into the dark, we caught absolutely nothing. As we were commiserating by the water's edge, the president of the club, one Alezio Rech, turned up. He had a heavy creel and began with justifiable pride to display his catch to the discontented and now muttering figures on the shore. There was a rainbow hen approaching two pounds, and holding up another fish of just under that weight he said, with a total lack of pretension: "I released a number of about this size." In the growing darkness the glances of envious eyes met in the circle round the creaking and bulging creel. The stars were beginning to come out, a bushbuck barked up the valley and a Piet-my-vrou or two were still calling somewhere among the pines. A few fish were rising to the surface of the water here and there. It was a pretty scene. Walking alone for a moment down by the boats one could hear the water still dripping from an oar.

There breathes a living fragrance from the shore,
Of flowers yet fresh with childhood; on the ear
Drops the light drip of the suspended oar,
Or chirps the grasshopper one good-night carol more.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage III, LXXXVI, 6-9.)

Rech, being an Italian, would be in a position to appreciate Lord Byron, that man so much maligned by modern Britons. He came along the bank and we exchanged a few remarks about the fishing conditions, the weather, his son's visit to Finland. It occurred to me at that moment that as I was leaving for another part of the country this could possibly be the last such conversation we should ever have. He knew it too. He surely realised the terrible impermanence of everything. We had met one another and spoken this way for some years.

Standing there I recalled similar conversations with other fishing friends along streams and lanes, in Devon and Derbyshire, around Europe, and by an old mountaineer's stream-side cabin in Virginia. The same quiet understatement was there. The same sort of statements were left unstated, left unsaid.

When I'd first seen this man he was fishing. Hardy rod, Borsalino felt hat, etc. I'd thought here's an Italian count, how unusual in an almost uninhabited area of the Transvaal. But then again, how perfect a place for such a man, here in this refuge from what Ferlinghetti aptly calls the "mass mess". Such people, our fishing friends past, present, imaginery, indeed we ourselves, might all well be the same, united in the trembling, fleeting reflections, there on the water's surface, as in a dream.

Imagining a man,
· · · · ·
And grey Connemara cloth,
· · · · ·
And the down-turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream.

(W. B. Yeats, The Fisherman, II, 4, 6, 9-12.)

Driving away through the forests I saw a bushbuck and two duiker. A few days later, at dawn, I drove away down an enormous valley towards Zebediela on my way out to a new home in Zululand. There were blue mountains, fine grasslands and vast mealie fields, all filled with game. Shortly there were the trouty-looking streams of the Lydenburg area. I muttered something about utter insanity. The springers looked at me questioningly. In the back of the bakkie the cats sat sulking in their wicker basket, a favourite hen clucked, a favourite drake called loudly. The small truck hurried busily away.